

Merrick Jarrett, 1924-2005

Circumspice si monumentum requiris

Merrick Jarrett is dead, and suddenly the world of traditional Canadian music seems smaller. In London's St Paul's Cathedral there is a famous epitaph for the architect Sir Christopher Wren that reads, "If you seek his monument look around you." In Latin, of course. The same could be said of Merrick, except it might be more appropriate to listen rather than to look.

Merrick Jarrett loved folk music. He devoted his life to it. He loved the songs, he loved the collectors, he loved the singers. He sang all the time, in the public spotlight, in schools, in libraries, in clubs, in festivals, on the radio, for his family, and when he found himself alone he sang to himself. He courted his beloved Mary by singing to her. His life flowed on in endless song, as the old song goes.

Jarrett was a humble man. He wrote his biography as a labour of love to pass on to his family and friends. Such an endeavour could easily become a vanity piece, but not with Merrick writing it. The title speaks for itself: *"My Life in Folk Music, Or, How To Succeed, More or Less, on Five Guitar Chords, Four Keys, a Capo, and a Lot of Nerve"*. The book is filled with self-deprecating stories: Being unable to tune his guitar and having the person next to him, some woman named Joan Baez, tune it for him. Of meeting Ed McCurdy again in a CBC studio who promptly said, upon hearing him warm up, "Well, you still don't have a voice!" Of having a friend tape Alan Mills' celebrated "Folk Songs for Young Folk" CBC programs until Mills sent him a book of his songs inscribed, "To Merrick, so he won't have to record them off the radio anymore."

What a life it was! His parents encouraged his interest in music and, when he was fourteen, bought him a second-hand set of pipes. As he later said, bagpipes are *an ill wind that nobody blows good*. Forced to practise outside, for obvious reasons, his playing moved a neighbour to tears, or so she said. Later, he came to realize it was his *learning* to play the pipes that brought on the tears.

He started performing on radio station VORG in Gander, Newfoundland, in 1944. VORG stood for 'The Voice of Radio Gander', and the station had a radius of two miles. Having a lot of time on his hands, and an inordinate interest in Wilf Carter songs, Merrick practised his guitar and his yodeling and sang on the radio station. The performing bug bit him.

A wireless officer with the RCAF Transport Command, he was transferred to Montreal and got a

job singing cowboy songs on a Montreal station. The prospect of singing before thousands scared him witless, as he said, and he started off playing in one key and singing in another. "Not exactly the best way to start a program." After the war he found himself singing on Toronto radio with the "CHUM Valley Folks". Unfortunately, they were up against CBC's legendary "Happy Gang". Eventually he moved to CFRB and a prime time spot with "The Danforth Radio Folks".

Now married to Mary, they both became involved with a group of talented people who loved folk music and who called themselves "The Do Gang". This legendary group included Dr Alan Gordon, a founder of the Algoma Folk Festival, and the artist Robert Bateman.

Jarrett's singing took him to the stage at the Canadian National Exhibition, to a gig with the Richmond Hill Symphony Orchestra, and to performing square dances in Toronto's Casa Loma.

His interest in traditional music expanding, he visited the Archive of American Folk Song in the Library of Congress in Washington. Here he came across early recordings by Pete Seeger, Leadbelly, Richard Dyer-Bennet, Woody Guthrie, and the Lomaxes. While in America he also performed with such luminaries as Jean Redpath and a very young and scruffy Bob Dylan. He and Joe Glazer travelled to Mexico to perform together in a very large concert. Not being fluent in Spanish, Merrick greeted the audience with a "Buenas noche, damas y caballos!" When the laughter subsided, he learned he had said, "Good evening, ladies and horses!"

The CBC finally beckoned, thanks to Max Ferguson. With Joyce Sullivan he sang on Edith Fowke's "A Man and a Maid". This led to other network series with Edith doing the research and script and Merrick doing the singing and narrating. Riverside Records, based in New York, asked Jarrett for a record of cowboy songs. The record was produced and sold well. It then appeared under other labels, at cheaper and cheaper prices, and continued to sell well. Parts of it appeared in "A Child's Introduction to Folk Music" (narrated by Ed McCurdy) and also sold well. The problem was: Merrick had never signed a contract with Riverside. Prestige for recording a popular American album, versus no money in the bank. Merrick was happy, Mary less so.

Scarborough's Quality Records produced a live album of Merrick and his daughter Kate singing to an

audience of school children. I have this album, fascinating in the choice of songs, Merrick's strong, younger voice, and his way with kids. The record, alas, is very poor quality (made by Quality!) and is hard to listen to.

Here endeth Merrick Jarrett's professional recording career. It should be noted that, near the end of his life, Merrick recorded several CDs for his family and friends as mementos to remember him by. These limited edition CDs are a great treasure for me.

Despite having a job in the book business, Merrick Jarrett performed in countless folk festivals and rubbed shoulders with people whose names are the very drum roll and fanfare of folk music: Ed McCurdy, Jean Ritchie, Sylvia Tyson, Alan Mills, Pete Seeger and the Weavers, Joan Baez, Burl Ives, Joe Hickerson, the Travellers, Margaret Cristl, Bram Morrison, Sara Grey, Estelle Klein, Michael Cooney, Rosalie Sorrels, John Allen Cameron, Friends of Fiddler's Green, the Beers Family, Beverlie Robertson, Eve Goldberg, Clary Croft ... the list seems endless.

In the 1970s Merrick became Program Coordinator for the Kitchener Public Library. The Jarretts moved to Kitchener, and, a short time later, Merrick initiated a course on folk music for the University of Waterloo through Conrad Grebel College, a Mennonite college. By the end, he must have taught at least three thousand students about traditional music.

It was, by any measure, a wonderful course. Aided and abetted by his collection of six hundred albums of folk music, Jarrett devised a fascinating course that captivated his students. Many went on to careers greatly influenced by Merrick. Beverlie Robertson, Jack Cole who runs the Old Chestnuts Song Circle, Jean Mills and her dulcimer, children's entertainers Rick and Judy, storyteller Mary Eileen McClear ... another endless list.

In the 1980s the Ontario Library Services invited Jarrett to participate in their outreach tours. This was when Merrick and his limberjacks, or "Dancing Dolls", performed for thousands of children. Gruelling trips singing concerts day after day, from Sudbury to the Sault, from Niagara Falls to Stouffville. This included one concert to an empty house – everyone was home watching the Blue Jays win the World Series.

Merrick was the musical glue for his own family. With his beloved wife Mary, their three children, his sister Sheila, and assorted grandchildren, you could always be sure of a kitchen table singing session. His daughter Kate carries on the tradition with her Parent-Child Mother Goose programs and performances with her husband John Hart.

Jarrett never completely retired. Lugging his 12-string guitar he still seemed to be wherever people sang folk songs – in living rooms, song circles, backyards (mine), festivals, Mariposa, clubs, Toronto's famous 1001 Friday Nights of Storytelling (where he sang "Barbara Allen"), down in some lone green valley, where the Fraser River flows, up Citadel Hill, sur la rivière, down in the Red River valley, derrière' chez nous, out on the lone prairie, in the Little Abitibi where the black flies are pickin' your bones, on the bonny banks of Virgie O, in the place where the fishermen gather, dans les chantiers, by a great big sea, in a little old sod shanty, à la claire fontaine, in the land of the pale blue snow, where still the mighty moose wanders at will, in the earliest moon of winter time, in the evening by the moonlight, you'd find Merrick Jarrett.

Come to think of it, he's still there. Whenever and wherever we sing those good old songs, Merrick Jarrett will be there, joining in with enthusiasm.

Oh, Merrick! You shunned the spotlight all your life, always giving credit to others. But you were centre stage in so many hearts.

Lorne Brown

Correction

Alistair McGillivray's song "The Coal Town Road," published in issue 39.2, p. 13, was actually written in 1975, according to the author. The book *Songs for the Mira and Other Compositions*, from which it was taken, was published in 1979, not 1939. Our heartfelt apologies for this egregious error!

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